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More than Just a Program: 'It's a Family'

Now in its 11th year, RWU's Intercultural Leadership Ambassador Program & Scholarship 'family' is only growing stronger



Intercultural Leadership Ambassadors (from left to right) Aryanna Blake '20, Rachel Campbell '20, Stephanie Cruz '20 and Brianna Messa '20 use the kitchen in the Intercultural Center to bake one of their fellow cohort members a cake for their birthday.

October 11, 2017 | Juan Siliezar

BRISTOL, R.I. – When talking about RWU's Intercultural Leadership Ambassador Program & Scholarship students, alumni and staff often use the same word to describe it: Family.

The reason is simple. Families often bring together individuals from all different walks of life to form a tight-knit community that supports one another to achieve success. This program, they say, is no different.

A Family-style Approach

Established in 2007, [the program](#) (abbreviated as ILAPS but commonly referred to as ILA) recognizes and rewards full-tuition scholarships to students from diverse backgrounds who demonstrate great academic and leadership potential, and an aptitude for perseverance and community involvement.

"The original idea for the scholarship was to be able to recruit and bring more diversity to campus," said Don Mays, director of the Intercultural Center which acts as a gathering hub for recipients. "That is at the heart of the program and will continue to be so as the university keeps pushing toward its goal of creating a more diverse campus community."

For many students and alumni, the program's defining success, however, is the way it brings people together as a community. For recipients, ILAPS – and the Intercultural Center where it's based – becomes a close-knit hub of resources and support they can turn to for whatever they need – whether it be academic or personal support.

"ILA is forever," said Kiserian Jackson, a senior biology major. And though new to the "ILA family," freshman Judith Suffrard echoed his statements: "There's our classmates; there's our roommates; there's our circle of friends – then there's the ILA."



Sarah Agnalt '18 takes the value of her education even further by taking part in faculty-led engineering research.

Sarah Agnalt, a senior engineering student, says the ILAPS community was where she turned to when she felt out of place or needed a source of encouragement. "It's more like a family in that regard," she said. "It's filled with people who can relate to you, where you come from and what you're going through."

This kind of "family aspect" is ingrained into the design of the program, Mays said. Students – through cohort building activities and through activities that bring together all current ILAPS students – have many opportunities to get to know one another and bond. For example, ILAPS freshmen have an earlier move-in date than other freshmen so they can have extra time with each other and the upperclassman volunteers who come and act as mentors. Bonding also happens on cohort trips, movie nights and at large family-style dinners that Mays organizes.

Freshmen also attend one-on-one check-ins with ILAPS advisors for their first-year to help them make the transition from high school to college and connect them with whatever resources they might need.

It all succeeds in bringing ILAPS recipients together both as a cohort and across class years. And through that, it encourages them – like any family – to help one another succeed.

For instance, at one of the large dinners, Suffrard after saying she was having trouble in her micro-economics class found someone to tutor her in the subject. When Agnalt was thinking of switching her major, speaking with advisors and other ILAPS recipients motivated her to continue in her rigorous engineering courses.

Students are continually there for one another, Mays said, even after they graduate.

Bre'Anna Metts-Nixon, a 2013 alumni now in the RWU School of Law, often tells current ILAPS students that along with their advisors, she's there for them to talk to as well. "It's a connection throughout the entire time that you're here," she said.

It's that kind of connectivity and camaraderie that Mays and the other ILAPS advisors – Karen Bilotti, associate director for [RWU's Tutorial Support Service](#); and Anne Marie Cerda, manager of Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences operations – love to see, and the type of work that lets them know their family-style approach is having an effect on bringing students together and turning them into future leaders.

A Decade of Work

ILAPS has had continued success since its establishment. The program has awarded 163 scholarships and has graduated over 80 students so far. This year – its 11th – the program awarded 10 scholarships to freshmen and is expected to graduate 12 seniors.

"We want students to thrive," Mays said. "ILA is an approach that allows students to have as rich an experience at Roger Williams as possible by removing the financial barrier."



Judith Suffrard '21 is an Intercultural Leadership

Ambassador who is looking to get involved on campus and leave her mark. She's started by becoming the vice president of the Class of 2021.

Students in the program often boast high GPAs and high rates of involvement on campus, Mays said. They take leadership roles in student clubs and organizations and take advantage of opportunities like internships or study abroad.

For Axel Perez '16, this couldn't have been truer. "Being a part of this program not only made college possible for me financially, but it gave me the chance to meet some great people and participate more fully in my college experience," he said. Perez excelled at RWU, receiving the certificate for highest achiever in Italian language and literature from the International Studies Institute at Palazzo Rucellai when he studied abroad in Italy in Fall 2013. Currently, Perez is putting his experience abroad to use as a travel consultant.

Nada Mustafa '17 says the program taught her a valuable life lesson. "This scholarship really opened my eyes to the opportunities that are out there," said Mustafa, who hopes to attend graduate school next year. "It taught me not to accept any limitations."

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